

When hostilities broke out two admirals were appointed, one to guard the North Sea and one the Channel, with commissions enabling them to press into their service all the ships and men they required. Each admiral went down to the coast assigned to him, laid an embargo on all vessels in the parts under his command, and proceeded to select the best merchant ships and the likeliest seamen for the formation of an improvised fleet. While this mobilisation, often a slow and mismanaged process, was going forward, no ship might leave port. Trade was at a standstill. Ships ready for some adventure to Flanders or Iceland, rotted in dock for six months together, and the most seaworthy vessels were forced to pay the penalty of their fitness by being seized to fight the King's battles. At last a motley crowd of several hundred barques of all sizes and shapes would be got together at Portsmouth or Gravesend, and sail out on the forced service, in quest of the Spanish galleys off the Cornish coast or the Scotch pirates off Hull.<sup>1</sup>

Clumsy as this method was, it answered after a fashion. The navies of other lands were enlisted on much the same terms, and the material from which our admirals selected their ships and men was warlike enough, though without discipline or organisation. The merchant-sailor of those days was a man of blood from his youth up. There was little or no law on the sea save that of the strongest. Every vessel was liable to become a pirate if she met with craft that sailed under some foreign flag, or perhaps only hailed from some rival English port. While the primitive cannon carried by the larger ships were not formidable, the crew of the smallest were armed with swords and axes, so that by dash and pluck any skipper might do great things for himself and his town. Questions of right of trade were sometimes made the subjects of international treaty, but as often left to settle themselves by ruder means. To keep the \* open door \* at some exclusive port of Scandinavia or the Hanse League, it was necessary to send two or three good merchant ships armed to the teeth and determined to get their cargoes landed and sold at whatever cost of lives. On such terms as these the sea was a school of

\* See Ap.